

THE COWBOY WAY—Nov./Dec. 2002 issue

By Mickey Freiberg

Q: Now that I have an agent, what can I do to be a good client?

First of all, let me be the first to congratulate you on landing yourself an agent. Assuming your representation is of the reputable kind, you must either be a very good writer or the beneficiary of some very good contacts. I'd like to think that this exciting new representation is based on the quality of craft you've already demonstrated with one helluva spec script. And if I'm wrong, let's just go ahead and pretend.

Okay then, we have an agent with a hot new writer in hand (that's you), and it's now his job to get your name out there, build your reputation throughout the town, and get decision making people to take a look at your goods and possibly even meet with you. It will be your job to take meetings, impress the important people that now know your name (for at least a week), and back up any lies your agent has told on your behalf. Sounds easy enough, right? Maybe if it all goes well, you'll make a couple of fans in the industry. Perhaps they'll keep you in mind if an assignment comes up, or recognize your name the next time you go out with a spec. If you're one of the lucky few, it's even possible you might get a quick first sell. But for the sake of the question at hand, let's just say the window slowly closes and now it's back to the writing desk for you. This is when you'll have the chance to prove to your agent whether or not you're the type of client he likes to keep in his stable.

As a spec writer, you're probably used to working on your own. As a represented spec writer you will still be writing on your own, but plan on giving your agent a heads up whenever you come up with a new idea. This is the guy that's not just going to be paid to sell your material, but is looking to oversee the broad strokes of your career. Before you invest the next six months in hammering out that moving little opus that you've wanted to "set free" since film school, make sure that your representation is going to be willing and able to jump on board the project once it's been typed. Some agents are more *hands on* than others. Some would like to be involved, while others couldn't give a rat's whisker. It's strictly up to you to gauge the relationship you have with your own representation. But as a rule of thumb, a head's up never hurt anybody, and has been known to save an ego bruising on more than one occasion.

The last and most important aspect of your professional relationship is establishing a consistent line of communication. It's an agent's job to be constantly selling you; which is not the same thing as constantly talking to you on the phone. Do not mistake an agent for your friend, and do not be offended if your agent doesn't call you every day, or even every week. The only gauge you have for how well you are being represented is how well your reputation as a writer is being perpetuated. If you've done your job and supplied your agency with quality materials, then there are a few questions you now have the right to consider: How many meetings (or points of interest) did your agent get for you with that last spec submission? Were they legitimate meetings? Did anything productive come out of the whole dog and pony show? If the answers to these questions are all positive, then you have nothing to worry about. An agent doing his job properly should only have the time to call you when he has something important to say (*i.e.*, "So how are you going to spend all that money?"). If the answers all come out negative and your agent is avoiding your calls, then

the chances are you should start looking around for new representation. In that case you obviously need to give me a call. Just don't tell your agent I said so.

Q: Do you think that when you consider how many queries and stacks of scripts agents get, a gimmick (if it's clever) is a smart way to draw attention to your script?

A gimmick, by its very nature, is intended to evoke an extreme response; both positive and negative. If that's what you're looking for, then by all means gimmick away. Just don't forget that a gimmick isn't much different than a joke: some may be better than others, but there's not a one that's going to make everybody laugh. There's no denying that a gimmick can certainly draw attention to your materials. That's why, before using any kind of gimmick, I would recommend that you ask yourself two questions: *does this kind of attention add to or detract from the feel of the material itself?* And, *do these materials stand on their own once the momentary flash of attention has passed?*

As an example, let me tell you about a fairly decent gimmick I came across a while back. It came in a run-of-the-mill envelope amidst the rest of that day's stack of submissions. My assistant tore it open just like all the others (with one eye on the clock) and only brought it to my attention when he noticed the check attached to the enclosed query letter. The check was for \$1,000,000.00 and "In the event of the sale of my script" had been neatly printed under the notes section. I have to admit the idea was clever enough to tickle my funny bone, and I even had my assistant call the issuing bank and verify that the account was good for such a large amount. Of course, come to find out the poor struggling writer only had \$63 bucks to his name, but you can't begrudge such a ballsy show.

Now if you're thinking I'm coming down firmly on the side of clever gimmicks, then let me continue. Did this trick stick out? Well, I do still remember it. Did it get me to take a closer look at his query? Yep. Did it work? Not on your life. It took me exactly ten wasted seconds to digest his poorly written and derivative story pitch before I figured out why the guy's bank account was still so small. He'd spent so much time coming up with a cute little wrap job, that he'd probably never even realized the trouble with the materials themselves. So, let's just leave it with this final moral: If you've got the clever chops to pull off a good gimmick, more power to you. Just don't rely on a well-turned trick to cover up the talent you might be lacking in other places.